

Friends in need: Donna and Dan Araiza help others, honor lost daughter

By Ryan Sabalow

Saturday, October 9, 2010

It would have been easy for Donna Araiza to be overwhelmed with grief when her 9-year-old daughter, Alyssa, died after months of horrific, painful cancer treatment.

Instead, Araiza turned her grief into goodness.

It's been nine years since Alyssa died.

Since then, Donna and her husband, Dan, have raised close to \$450,000 for local families whose children are suffering from cancer and other serious, often-fatal diseases. All told, more than 125 local families have been helped by the Alyssa Araiza Wings of Angels Organization, the nonprofit foundation the Araizas started in their daughter's honor.

"Here it is nine years later, and she'll never be forgotten," Donna Araiza, 52, said on Thursday, the day after the anniversary of her daughter's death.

Redding community leaders and the families who have benefited from the program say the foundation's work is inspiring and remarkable, considering almost all of Wings of Angels' proceeds come from individual donations, from north state service clubs and businesses and from a handful of local fundraisers. Large corporate sponsorships are few and far between.

Donna Araiza, who works at Redding's electric department, and her husband, who works for a local security company, don't get paid for their efforts. No one on the foundation's five-member board does, she said.

The foundation's primary funding source is next weekend. The annual spaghetti-dinner fundraiser is from 2 to 9 p.m. Saturday at the Sons of Italy hall at 4850 Cedars Road in Redding.

This year's spaghetti feed has special poignancy for the Araizas. Alyssa would have turned 18 this September, Donna Araiza said.

Before Alyssa died, her parents asked her if they could make a foundation in her honor to help sick kids like her.

"She thought it was going to be so cool," Donna Araiza said.

The face of this year's spaghetti dinner is Abigail Courtmanche, a 10-year-old Redding girl who had her third bone marrow transplant at the University of California- San

Francisco's children's hospital this week.

To hear the Courtmanches and other families of children who have had cancer tell it, the Araizas are a bright light in the darkest of times.

And it's not just the gas cards the Araizas give out each year by the dozen to help offset the families' costs for the seemingly never-ending trips from the north state and back to cancer centers at children's hospitals in Sacramento and San Francisco.

"I've talked to her (Donna) a lot more lately about my feelings," said Abigail's mom, Candice Courtemanche.

Rachael Cassidy, whose now 6½-year-old son Tristan survived cancer when he was a toddler, said the Araizas were available to talk day or night.

The words of encouragement were invaluable since they knew what her family was going through, said Cassidy, 38, of Redding.

"When life is completely impossible, they make it a little easier," Cassidy said. "Sometimes that's all you need to make it through the next hour or the next day."

Debbie Butcher, the Gerber grandmother and primary caregiver of 19-year-old Stephan Surtees, agreed. Surtees has been battling cancer since 2008. The foundation has been the key funding source that's allowed the family to travel from Gerber to San Francisco as many as three times a month, Butcher said.

"I think they're the most wonderful people in the world," Butcher said. "They're like angels to us. ... They've been down the same road. They know exactly what we're going through."

The families say the Araizas' fortitude is striking. The Araizas have to relive the same grief they felt when Alyssa died every time cancer takes a child from a local family.

Donna Araiza said that's a sad reality that happens all too often.

"Sometimes it's hard, sure, but it's such a rewarding thing to get to be a part of these families' lives," she said. "We've made some really, really good friends."

Nicki Thompson, 35, of Anderson is one of those.

Her 9-year-old son Logan has been cancer-free for nearly a year. Once he's made it past the year mark, Thompson said she'll begin volunteering for the foundation. She said it's rare to meet people as genuine and kind as the Araizas.

"They are an amazing family," she said. "Their aura is just beautiful. When they speak, it's just so true with themselves. They just genuinely want to go out and help these families."

